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ABSTRACT

This study dealt with the perceptions of eight University of Maryland counselors of the sex-related problems of female Maryland students. Five of the eight counselors felt that some students have not had an adequate sex education or adequate information about contraception. The counselors rated decisions involving whether to engage in premarital sexual relations as the most relevant of ten problems to female Maryland students and rated the lack of information about venereal disease as the least relevant problem of the ten. Five counselors said research on sexual attitudes and behavior at the University of Maryland would be helpful to them in counseling students if such research were done; seven of the eight counselors would prefer a method using structured interviews with a random sample. (Author)

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COUNSELING CENTER
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COLLEGE PARK, MARYLAND

COUNSELOR PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ATTITUDES OF
FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Research Report # 11-70

Abstract

The study is a preliminary step in planning research on sexual attitudes and behavior at the University of Maryland. After a brief review of the exceedingly limited research on sex on campus, the study dealt with the perceptions of eight University of Maryland counselors of the sex-related problems of female Maryland students. Five of the eight counselors felt that some students have not had an adequate sex education or adequate information about contraception. The counselors rated decisions involving whether to engage in premarital sexual relations as the most relevant of ten problems to female Maryland students and rated the lack of information about venereal disease as the least relevant problem of the ten. Five counselors said research on sexual attitudes and behavior at the University of Maryland would be helpful to them in counseling students and if such research were done, seven of the eight counselors would prefer a method using structured interviews with a random sample.

Reliable information on the sexual behavior of American college students of the 1960's is conspicuous by its absence. Data gathered before 1960 is equally sparse and many of the studies that have been published on sexual behavior are of questionable reliability and validity.

The most recently published study of collegiate sexual standards and behavior was reported by Vance Packard in his recent book, The Sexual Wilderness, 1968. In conjunction with Dr. Eleanore B. Luckey and Dr. Gilbert D. Nass of the University of Connecticut, Packard distributed 2100 questionnaires on sexual behavior and attitudes to junior and senior students at 21 colleges and universities across the United States. In addition, 809 students from English, German, Norwegian and Canadian universities filled out the questionnaires. In the U.S. survey, 67% of the students returned questionnaires. Responses were analyzed both according to region and according to whether the institution is public or private, secular or religiously affiliated, and conservative or liberal in its campus regulations.

The results of the survey indicated a relatively small change in the premarital sexual behavior of male students compared with studies from the 1950's (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948, 1953; Ehrmann, 1959, Kirkendall, 1961; Reiss, 1960, 1967), but showed a marked change in the premarital sexual behavior of female students. Kinsey, et al (1953) reported that 27% of the college-educated females in his sample had had intercourse by age 21 and Ehrmann (1959) reported that 13% of the coeds in his sample from a southern university were non-virgins. In the recent Packard survey, 43% of the 688 females who responded to the questionnaire reported coital experience. While Packard grants that his survey is not comprehensive enough to be more than suggestive of national

collegiate behavior, his data strongly support the assertion that sharp changes have occurred in the sexual behavior and attitudes of female students. In his book, Packard also reviews earlier studies of sexual behavior, reports on the data from the International Sample and discusses future trends in sexual and marital attitudes in American society in general.

Most of the current material on collegiate sexual behavior is limited to informal observations and impressions of behavior and attitude changes (Greene, 1964; Farnsworth, 1965), prescriptive and speculative articles on how to deal with changes (Sex and the College Student, 1965; Charles and Chez, 1969; Grunwald 1964; Woodring, 1969) and small surveys of behavior or attitudes on problems of contraception, promiscuity or abortion (Deutscher, 1965; Grinder and Schmitt, 1966; Walters, 1965). Earlier studies by Kinsey et al, Kirkendall, Ehrmann, Freedman and Reiss are all based on data collected in the late 1940's and 1950's. Only Reiss' book, Social Context of Premarital Sexual Permissiveness (1967), deals with post-1960 data, and that is limited to sampling done in the early 1960's. Evidence of changes from decade to decade in these pre-1960 studies would imply that data gathered 10 years ago do not give an accurate picture of collegiate sexual behavior in 1970.

In summary, the research data on the sexual attitudes and behavior of contemporary college students is almost non-existent. The literature has many articles which discuss sex on campus and the problems it may cause for students or administrators, but few which have hard data on actual behavior or expressed attitudes.

Research studies on sexual behavior do present rather formidable problems. Honesty of response, representativeness of the sample and validity and reliability of the research methods or instruments used are three of the major difficul-

ties. While these problems often seem insoluble, they must be dealt with in some fashion if desperately needed research is to take place. Throughout discussions of sex on campus in the literature were expressions of the urgent need for reliable and current data on collegiate sexual behavior and mores. Many writers stressed the fact that making sound decisions on institutional policies related to sexual behavior in areas such as sex education or contraceptive information is almost impossible without some research data on which to base policies and programs.

The present study was undertaken as a preliminary step in planning a survey of sexual attitudes and behavior at the University of Maryland. The study consists of a short questionnaire given to counselors at the University of Maryland Counseling Center. The questionnaire sought counselor perceptions of the nature and extent of sex-related problems encountered by female University of Maryland students. The study also asked for the counselors' suggestions on what type of services and research in the area of sex on campus would be helpful to them in counseling students. The study was limited to females because recent changes in sexual behavior seem to be most dramatic among women. (Packard).

Method

The study employed a short questionnaire (11 items) given to 10 University of Maryland counselors who counsel Maryland students on personal/social problems. The questionnaire asked for counselor perceptions of how frequently University of Maryland female students encounter problems related to sexual behavior or standards. Counselors were also asked to note the relevance of particular "sex-related" problems to Maryland coeds, to indicate whether they would find research in the area helpful and to specify if the Counseling Center could be

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doing anything more in terms of new programs or services to help with problems related to sex on campus.

Results

Eight of the ten possible counselors responded to the questionnaire.

None of the eight noticed an increase in problems related to sexual behavior or sexual mores in the last five years in counseling women at the University of Maryland. Five answered "no" to the item and three said they have not been here for five years.

The eight counselors reported that 60% of their clients with social/emotional problems are female and 53% of those female clients have had sex-related problems in the last six months. Four counselors said they couldn't give a percentage because the term "sex-related problem" was too vague.

Five counselors estimated that most female students at Maryland had not received adequate sex education. One counselor felt that Maryland coeds had received adequate sex education and the remaining two said "probably not," and "I haven't inquired into this". Five counselors felt female Maryland students did not have adequate information on contraception, one felt they had had adequate information and two counselors said, "Don't know."

Four counselors said there is a distinction between problems related to sexual attitudes and problems related to sexual behavior. Three did not think there is such a distinction and one counselor felt unable to answer the question as written.

Seven counselors rated the relevance of certain problems to female Maryland students on a one to five scale (1- not relevant; 5-very relevant), and the following mean ratings were computed:

	<u>Mean</u>
Decisions involving whether to engage in premarital sexual relations	4.14
Feelings of guilt about sexual behavior	3.85
Problems in a particular premarital relationship	3.71
Problems related to an unwanted pregnancy	3.71
Decisions related to abortion	3.57
Confusion regarding sexual attitudes or behavior of peers	3.28
Lack of information about contraception	3.28
Guilt feelings following abortion	3.00
Guilt feelings following adoption of illegitimate child	2.71
Lack of information about venereal disease	2.42

Three counselors felt the Counseling Center should provide some kind of information and referral services for students, at least for those who are not minors. One counselor also mentioned working to change University and Health Service policies and another suggested working with the department of Health Education and the Health Service to "study the problem of providing good information." One counselor said, "I don't know that new programs are needed", and three did not respond to the item.

Five counselors said research on sexual attitudes and behavior would be helpful to them in counseling students. Two said it would not be helpful and one counselor said it would "probably" be helpful.

If such research were done, seven counselors favored a structured interview with a random sample, three recommended mail-out questionnaires to a sample, two recommended questionnaires administered in classes and one recommended questions on the University Student Census (USC). The USC is administered annually to all undergraduates at the University. None felt a structured interview with a self-

selected sample would be helpful.

Discussion

Several counselors expressed dissatisfaction with the questionnaire and said they felt its vagueness prohibited them from expressing their thoughts precisely. The problem with the questionnaire coupled with the small number of persons participating in the study sharply limits the usefulness of the information. The study did show that counselors would not find interview data from a self-selected sample useful. The fact that seven of the eight counselors responding felt that a structured interview with a random sample would yield useful research data gives a possible direction for future research. A series of studies on student sexual attitudes and behavior is currently underway at the University of Maryland.

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